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DEPARTMENT OF SOCIAL WORK

THE PRESENT PUBLIC POOR RELIEF OF BERLIN—ITS ORGANIZATION AND ITS EFFECTIVENESS¹

The system of poor relief in most large German cities is partly modeled after the well-known Elberfeld system, which, although inaugurated in 1853, has since been measurably transformed by the recent rapid growth of cities and changing social and industrial conditions. Owing to differences in social order and political institutions, the Germans have developed a system of public poor relief which is a masterpiece of organization, compared with which American and English organized efforts are relatively unimportant. The last annual report on the administration of public poor relief shows that during the fiscal year, April 1, 1904, to March 31, 1905, 3,897 persons were directly engaged in the work, the figures varying slightly from year to year. The decrease in the number of persons directly active in this field of municipal service for 1905 is merely due to a change in the method of computation, and is apparent rather than real. Of the 3,897 persons in 1904-05, there were 3,142 male visitors of the poor (Pfleger), 37 female visitors, 367 ward chairmen (Armenkommissionsvorsteher), and 351 vice-chairmen. The total expenditure for the relief of the poor in 1904 was 23,105,665 marks, having gradually increased from 19,820,436 in 1901. Of the sum expended in 1904, two-thirds, or a total of 14,817,364 marks, was spent for administration; the remainder for the public care of the sick in various hospitals. Since the city organized these hospitals on a business basis a certain amount of income is insured, which, however, covers scarcely more than 25 per cent of the annual expenses. The city continually receives donations from private persons, even though the administration and disbursement are left with the city poor relief organization. Since the total income from these sources is less than 25 per cent, the city's poor tax, while comparatively lower than in other large cities, is a matter of general consideration. The sum thus raised in 1904 by Berlin amounted to 18,937.536 marks, a per capita average of 9.66 marks, against 9.69 marks for the year 1903. The absolute increase is presumably due to the removal of the wealthier classes to the suburbs, and to the increase of the poor.

As has been intimated, not all of the relief work in Berlin is done by public effort. Private enterprise is active everywhere in supplementing the work, but its financial features cannot be accurately stated. The statistical yearbook of Berlin for 1905 gives the following data relative to this phase of poor relief. The table represents a series of foundations which is administered by the city, but it is not complete, as certain sources of the income could not be capitalized. The table follows:

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	Marks.
(a) Servants' wage foundations	1,069,759
(b) Voluntary loan banks and foundations	2,007,264
(c) The municipal foundations	92,527
(d) Larger foundations turned over to the city	12,811,062
(e) Aid to philanthropic societies by the city	321,005
 Total	 16,301,617

In addition to the private foundations administered by the city, considerable sums were collected and administered by philanthropic institutions and societies, among which are the following: (a) Hospitals, educational and reform institutions and asylums; (b) the Berlin Society for Household Sanitation; (c) the Berlin Society for Vacation Colonies, and (d) miscellaneous. The amount thus spent cannot, of course, be given. The sum total of the work thus carried on by private initiative is a factor, however, whose force must not be underestimated in dealing with the problems of poor relief in Berlin.

The figures for the last month of the fiscal year 1904-05 (March, 1905) showed the following results: 33,713 persons averaging 16 marks each per month were receiving permanent support; 11,383 cases of partial support for children were carried at a cost of 7½ marks per child; 732 others were given regular support, and 6,065 persons received an average of 11 marks per capita as temporary aid; 2,044 were otherwise assisted. During the succeeding six months the monthly averages decreased somewhat, due to a falling off in the amount paid out for temporary aid—the result of the return of warmer weather and increase of work.

I. *Organization.*

Though modeled after the Elberfeld system, Berlin has adopted such portions as could be easily applied. Changes in the details of the organization are constantly taking place. Although adopted in 1853 in Elberfeld, Germany, the Elberfeld system represents a historical growth, and not a creation. Its immediate success caused its gradual adoption in other German cities—in the smaller cities first. The plan originally formulated in Elberfeld provided, according to the act of July 9, 1852, for a directorate of eight; while, for the purposes of administration, the city was divided into ten wards (*Bezirke*), each of which was further divided into fifteen *quartiers*. There were to be sixteen persons in each ward—a chairman and fifteen visitors. The latter, even from the very beginnings of this system, included persons of all callings and professions. The visitors received no salary, but in return gained certain social distinctions. The wards and *quartiers* gradually increased from twenty in 1879 to four hundred and thirty-four in 1889, and to over five hundred in 1903. Women were not allowed to serve as visitors under the original scheme, but have since been permitted to act in that capacity, since it was found to have brought good results in other cities.

When the system was first introduced in Elberfeld, it was claimed that if the aid came from the city all private initiative would be cut off. This has proven untrue, for many foundations and quite a few philanthropic societies have been organized, especially in the larger cities like Berlin. Financially the Elberfeld system has proven economical.

In Berlin the *Armendirektion* is a subordinate part of the city council. The *Armendirektion*, which is quite a large body of both paid and unpaid members, stands at the head of the public poor relief. Heretofore it was customary for the commissioners to have direct supervision of the work of the chairman in each ward, and of the visitors under his control. Recently, owing to the pressure of work, and especially to the need of neighboring wards knowing all matters of mutual interest, another link of administrative organization was placed in between the Commissioners of the Poor and the ward, known as the circles (*Kreise*). This attempt has resulted in an expected facilitation of control and of decentralization. At present there are many such circles (*Kreise*) in Berlin, each one being attended by ten to fifteen ward chairmen, who meet monthly and exchange views and discuss matters, such as excessive expenditures in relief, or cases in which some unusual action has been taken.

All German citizens, without distinction of sex, residing in Berlin, can be drawn into the public poor relief service, if their record is free from criminal charges. The term of office is three years and is entirely honorary, while their sphere of activity in general is in the ward in which they reside. The chairman is elected from the body of visitors in each ward. All of the work must really pass through his hands and he acts, furthermore, as agent or go-between for the Poor Commissioners. Stadtrat Muensterberg believes that an essential part of the Elberfeld system consists in this, that the members at the monthly ward conference determine whether support should be given, and the amount in each case; and that this is done on their own responsibility. The Poor Commissioners naturally reserve the right to alter such decisions.

While the introduction of the circle is, perhaps, an important deviation from the Elberfeld system, it has not been the most radical. In Elberfeld support for permanent cases of relief has never been allowed for a longer period than fourteen days, being renewed from time to time as deemed expedient. In Berlin support, if permanent, is given for one year. After aid has been allowed, the case is no longer closely followed; hence it has happened here that the person receiving such aid has died during the year and the money been collected by someone else, or such person has removed to another ward and received similar aid.

A further deviation from the Elberfeld system has been the introduction of women visitors, the last annual report (1904-05) showing thirty-seven thus employed. The ward members have, until very recently, shown much opposition to women as visitors, on the ground that this was no work for women, and that the women would not exercise good judgment. In this direction American methods have advanced considerably beyond the German.

As a final point of organization worthy of special note is the fact that in the Elberfeld system the town was divided into districts, and a visitor allotted to each. This gave a very uneven distribution of cases and necessitated constant partitioning. In Berlin, on the other hand, all new cases are directed to the ward chairman. He allots the investigation of these cases to the visitors in his ward according to such circumstances, as nearness to residence of the visitor, number of cases already in the hands of the visitor, and special aptitude of the latter for any particular case. The crux of the whole matter centers around the activity of the ward members, for it is they who carry on the work under an organization which is unequalled elsewhere for system.

II. *The Ward and Its Activity.*

The ward chairman must have a definite office hour daily, but this he can arrange to suit his convenience. The essential point is that the time is announced in such a way that those in need of help may know when and where to apply. It is, of course, expected that he will hear any urgent case outside of his office hours. The chairman naturally tries to secure as much data as possible from the person seeking relief, which he uses to check up the signed statement of this person after the visitor has investigated the case. Should a person ask for or require medical aid, the chairman must fill out a special blank, which serves as an official notification to the doctor to examine the patient. Upon the securing of sufficient details from the person seeking relief, the chairman is enabled to turn the matter of its investigation over to one of the ward visitors. One very noticeable characteristic of those seeking aid has been their neat appearance. This fact became increasingly evident in the visits to the rooms of those persons. True, in many cases the rooms lacked all but the most essential utensils and furniture, but there was an air of neatness and cleanliness which denoted some degree of thrift. Nor were the rooms specially prepared for the reception of the visitor, for he came unexpectedly, and sometimes did not find at home the persons whom he sought.

In accompanying the visitor, I became personally interested in two cases, and have included them in this article as concrete illustrations of the data upon which the visitors, at their monthly meeting, base their decision:

<i>Case "A."</i>	<i>Questions.</i>	<i>Case "B."</i>
Gustav P——	Name	Stephen D——.
Locksmith	Occupation	Day laborer.
Protestant	Religion	Catholic.
8/25/1869	Birth	12/18/1873.
Königsberg	Place of birth	Sempolvo.
Since 1871	Resident in Berlin	Since 1887.
No	Married	No.
2 (born out of wedlock)	Children	No.

<i>Case "A."</i>	<i>Questions.</i>	<i>Case "B."</i>
A mother, brother and two sisters on his side; a brother on her side.	Names of relatives of relief seeker and wife: (a) parents; (b) on her side.	A mother and sister on two sisters on his side; his side; two sisters on her side. brothers and sisters...
Yes	Own dwelling	Lives with sister.
12 marks per month....	Rent	10 marks per week for rent and food.
6 marks	Income from renting room.	
November, 10 marks.		
December, 8 marks..		Previous support None.
January, 8 marks...		
No	Any sick-benefit fund? No.	
14 weeks' steady employment.	Last place of employment	4 weeks at last place.
	Wages	10 cents per hour.
Partially employed by playing harmonica.	When last employed and means.	Odd jobs.
Yes	Incapable of working?..	No.
No.	Any old age or pension fund.	No.
No.	Member of a burial fund	Yes.
Right arm paralyzed ...	How prevented from Sickness.	earn his living.

In both cases the relief seekers were examined by the doctor and reported as sick and incapable of doing a man's work. In case "A" the investigator learned from other sources that the man's story was true to the extent that he earned his money by playing. He proposed that the man be given a new pair of shoes, for which he had asked, and perhaps a couple of marks only per month, for he had heard damaging testimony against the relief seeker. At the monthly meeting this testimony was corroborated by other members present, and it was decided to grant him a pair of shoes, but no money.

In the second case the doctor stated that the man was practically incapable of doing any work, and at best might undertake light work at infrequent intervals. The visitor corroborated this statement and said the only work the man had undertaken was coal-carrying, and even this he could scarcely do. He, therefore, proposed that ten marks per month be allowed him. During the discussion several members favored an increase of this sum, but it was finally decided to allow him the amount mentioned. Here we see two cases for relief owing to inability to do steady work—one because he was incapable, the other because he was but partially incapacitated. Had it not been for certain damaging evidence, the latter would also have been granted a small monthly allowance. If his case, however, is one of dire necessity, the ward chairman may interfere at any time; therefore, this door always stands open.

The monthly ward meeting usually takes place toward the end of the month, the actual date being fixed in each ward. All decisions require a majority vote, although the minority has the right to formulate its objections in writing and send them to the Poor Commissioners. At the beginning of the meeting, messages from the Poor Commissioners are read, and any general questions considered which the chairman may like to bring up. After that follows the discussion of the individual cases, each visitor having usually three, four, or even more to present. An old case is, of course, more rapidly disposed of, and it is surprising to note how familiar each member is with the details of such cases. New cases, on the other hand, require more minute consideration, but, unless there is absolute certainty in the matter, the maximum of relief is never allowed, as later investigation is usually relied upon to establish new facts. Nor is permanent support allowed until after the fourth month, another means of insuring conservative and cautious treatment of each case. This is the more necessary, because permanent aid means a grant for an entire year.

Minutes are kept of the proceedings at each meeting. In addition, books are kept containing the list of persons receiving support, and, furthermore, there are two cash books. The monthly report, made up by the ward chairman and sent to the Poor Commissioners at the beginning of each month, is made up from the following sources: (a) The minutes of the preceding meeting, (b) summary of the new cases of support, (c) list of persons receiving current support, (d) one of the cash books (as the two cash books are arranged according to the odd and even months of the year, to provide adequate auditing facilities), (e) the blanks, personal books, medical certificates and other papers requiring the vote of the members of the ward for decision. All this requires time and effort on the part of the members, especially of the chairman. Not infrequently the monthly meeting lasts into the early hours of the morning, although the various cases are dispatched in a very business-like manner and the members kept to the work under consideration.

As for the financial matters, each ward chairman is allowed such a monthly sum as is considered to be sufficient. In the ward which I visited this sum amounted to 1,600 marks, and the chairman told me that he had already satisfied all demands and still had a comfortable balance left. Should the sum prove insufficient, the matter is laid before the Poor Commissioners for a thorough revision, and if it is found that the ward chairman has been extravagant, he can be held responsible.

The real problem for solution at these monthly ward meetings is the nature and amount of support to be granted, should the case be deemed worthy of support. It may here be added that support is comparatively infrequently refused. The elements entering into each case include first of all the personal characteristics, age, sex, family conditions, health, etc.; further, whether the support shall be permanent or only for one month; whether the entire burden of support shall be assumed by the city, or only enough allowed to supply any deficiency to permit the person to live; whether the person is worthy or unworthy of support. Accordingly, a dis-

inction must be made between money and other means of aid; between indoor and outdoor relief. Of course, if the person is sent to a home, hospital or other public institution, he need have no further cares, as the living expenses, medical assistance, etc., are all provided for him. But if the person supported remains in his home, the usual method of support is by means of money and, to some extent, of food. Permanent support in such cases takes the form of alms and money for the care of children. Alms are given to persons who are apparently in need and incapable of earning their daily bread. Support is given to the mother of children where the mother could not otherwise provide for their proper care. As a rule, a mother who is in good health and able to work, is considered capable of supporting one child. Whether she can support more than one child depends upon circumstances. Aid may be granted regularly for children under fifteen years of age; but after that period, weakness or sickness of child or mother must be taken into consideration. Should the mother neglect sending her child or children to school regularly, support may be withdrawn, or the Poor Commissioners may even remove the child from a non-ethical and baneful influence. It is very difficult to determine the amount of support which should be granted in such cases, and abuse is bound to creep in, no matter how well organized a system may be.

Naturally, in cases of permanent support, the visitor comes into more confidential relations with his cases, and can exercise a most beneficial influence over them by advising them in regard to the various perplexing problems which cross their daily path. On the other hand, the visitor gets an insight, by practical experience, into the actual social conditions existing among the poorer elements in his own part of the city.

During the first office hour after the monthly conference, the persons who asked for aid usually came to the ward chairman's office, to learn whether they were granted the aid for which they asked. When permanent aid has been granted, the chairman hands the person to whom it has been given a blank which must be signed. By virtue of his signature the person granted permanent relief gives up all rights to any inheritance which may fall to him. The money from this possible source of income is turned into the Poor Commissioner's coffer. There have actually been several cases on record where a person has been granted permanent aid, but when the moment for signing the blank arrived failed to do so, thereby causing the grant to be withheld.

III. *Effectiveness of the System in Berlin.*

The facts thus far brought out are by no means complete, but they at least offer an indication of the effectiveness of the system in force in Berlin. The essential principle of this system is the thorough treatment of each case of need, with the object not only of alleviating suffering and poverty, but also of devising some means by which those who are dependent may be restored, in whole or in part, to self-support. And this can be accomplished only by means of a numerous body of visitors, with frequent meetings to discuss and to decide upon measures that are of practical utility.

The real effectiveness of the system of public relief in Berlin hinges on two salient points: (a) Individuality, (b) decentralization. In England and America individualization is more or less difficult because of the difference in public poor relief administration. In Berlin all payments of money are made personally to seekers of relief, and not from a central office. The division of the city into wards, with enough visitors in each to provide adequately for every case, is the nucleus around which this individuality centers. This ideal has, however, not been fully reached here, for Dr. Muensterberg stated recently that the results have not been so satisfactory as in Hamburg, because there are only 4,000 visitors of the poor in Berlin—relatively many less than in Hamburg. He advocates an increase of visitors to a total of 8,000 to make the work effective.

There is, however, a further defect noticeable in the system. The larger the city, the less educated are the visitors for this kind of work, and the greater is the difficulty experienced in bringing the visitors into more or less direct and homogeneous working relations. In order to offset this difficulty the circle (Kreise) was placed between the ward and the Poor Commissioners.

Without the decentralization so apparent in this system, in which the ward chairman and the members of his ward determine in general every case after full discussion, there could be no satisfactory results. In theory the Poor Commissioners reserve the right to pass final judgment upon each case, but in practice very few are brought in detail to their notice.

Finally, it should be noted that the administrators of public relief in Berlin have recently attempted to increase the effectiveness of their organization by keeping in close contact with private philanthropy, and also by advancing those agencies engaged in checking misery and poverty, especially those ministering to public health.

This individuality and decentralization has resulted in the personal investigation of each case; in preventing the visitor from becoming overburdened with cases, and, secondarily, in permitting the visitor to exert at least some beneficial influence over the persons in his hands.

The office of visitor of the poor is indeed a matter of honor, but the danger that it may be misused for furthering private ends is not unknown in Germany. It is, however, infrequent in practice. On the other hand, the social usefulness of such a system can scarcely be estimated, for the visitors are persons of the middle, and even upper, classes. A practical insight into the needs of the poor is really a most excellent school in social economy. In short, those connected with the administration of poor relief in Berlin have come to the conclusion (by personal experience) that the most careful observance of the Elberfeld system has resulted in a decrease in the burden of furnishing poor relief, and at the same time has increased the possibility of an outdoor relief which could be productive of good results. And the statistics for the administration of poor relief in the various larger German cities bear out the evidence of this experience. The preponderating amount of outdoor relief which is to be found here, is the result of the large number of visitors who may be counted upon with absolute certainty to exercise their office effectively and faithfully.